

Published as:

**Teri Klassen (2009) "Representations of African American Quilting: From Omission to High Art." *Journal of American Folklore*. 122(485):297-33.**

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<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/search.php?issn=0021-8715>, accessed July 19, 2012.

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## Representations of African American Quilting: From Omission to High Art

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*African American quilting began to gain recognition as an expressive form distinct from European American quilting in the countercultural climate of the 1970s. Representations of it since then have served to update the Eurocentric, patriotic image of quilting in the United States with components of multiculturalism and cultural critique. These representations in turn caused tensions along the lines of class, race, gender, and scholarly discipline. This study shows the power of words and things when used together, as in museum exhibits, to affirm or challenge the existing social order.*

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As anthropologist Webb Keane notes, material things have qualities of physical durability and underdeterminedness of meaning (1997:31–3, 197, 246–7 n. 10). Durability qualifies things to serve as a source of stability and continuity (Keane 1997:185, 192). I argue here that the underdeterminedness of material things complements their durability, allowing people to construct new meanings that can extend a material form's usefulness amid shifting social conditions, in some cases enlisting it as a force for change. Language greatly expands the social uses of both these capacities (see Keane 1997:66–7, 179, 185). It is often the tool used to construct representations of new things and to maintain or challenge established representations of familiar things. Whereas familiar material culture tends to be a conservative force, the appearance of a new (or reinterpreted) cultural form offers opportunities to contest and reconfigure value systems. The meaning of a new form is up for grabs until it becomes conventionalized through discourse. Multiple players may join the melee, especially if ideological agendas are in play, and the outcome is subject to factors that none of them control. Building on these ideas, this article examines the emergence of the idea of African American quilting in the United States to understand how people use language to frame material things to accomplish social goals.

Although scholars often have represented cultural objects as mirrors or texts, with the implication that they give insights into the maker's mind and culture, I would suggest that the metaphor of a blank Scrabble tile works better here. Seen in this way, objects acquire differing meanings as each interpreter incorporates them into his or her own context. As literary theorist Paul Ricoeur says of the written text, the mean-

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ing of an object is not necessarily limited to what was intended by the maker (author) but can be drawn from other sources as well (1981:210–1). In the case of a large contextual gap between viewer and maker, such as situations in which objects are unfamiliar to their viewers, viewers may fill in this lack of meaning by either familiarizing themselves with the maker's context or importing meaning from other contexts to which they have access (see also Bronner [1985] 1992:36; Upton 1991:162; Babcock 1992:207; Noyes 1995:461–3; Glassie 1999:47–67). Applying Ricoeur's ideas to understand the reactions of museum visitors to cultural objects, Pauline K. Eversmann and her colleagues note, "Visitors will also supply numerous other contexts that are culturally bound, highly individual, and embedded in their prior knowledge and experience" (1997:163). These issues play out not only in the interpretation of museum exhibits but in all forms of interaction with material culture. Here, I will use the realization that viewers do not just absorb the maker's meaning but create their own to help account for differing notions of African American quilting that have arisen since quilt histories began to be published in the early 1900s.

Adding to the potential for differing interpretations in this case is the fact that "African American quiltmakers" and "African American quilts" are umbrella terms that encompass a range of people and things that are alike in some ways but different in many others. Quiltmakers who share an African heritage may (or may not) also have European, American Indian, or Asian heritages, and they may differ as well in terms of age, socioeconomic class, urban or rural experiences, and exposure to what I will refer to here as "mainstream" quilting practices.<sup>1</sup> Further, quilts that are alike in having African American makers may differ according to nonethnic factors, such as regional conventions; adherence to current fashion; and the quiltmaker's skill, taste, and purpose in quilting (for example, to provide warmth at night or to create a family heirloom or a display object for a county fair). Viewers can develop widely differing and even contradictory interpretations by focusing on particular makers, regions, time periods, or quilt styles. With this selective approach, quilt styles used by African Americans (who often have some European American and or American Indian heritage) can be interpreted by viewers as fitting into a range of categories, such as American, European, African, "mainstream," the product of plantation mistresses, exotic, utilitarian, folk art, high art, modern art, outsider art, traditional, fancy, contingent, or improvisational. The wide variety of categories is related to "bundling," the capacity of material things to simultaneously embody several qualities, such as color, shape, weight, texture, and taste. Citing Nancy D. Munn's work, Keane notes that "the qualities bundled together in any object will shift in their relative salience, value, utility, and relevance across contexts" (2005:188). Interpreters can harness African American quilts for quite different purposes by highlighting some qualities and ignoring others.

In the sections that follow, I will use these ideas to offer a history of representations of African American quilting in the United States. The initial stage of this history, I argue, is characterized by the omission of African Americans from quilt histories and reflected conservative and patriotic uses of mainstream quilting. Later, in the counterculture climate shaped by the civil rights, antiwar, and women's movements, quilting became an arena for negotiating new representations of

women, African Americans, and high culture. Since the 1960s, various factions have interpreted African American quiltmaking as participating in mainstream quiltmaking, separate from mainstream quiltmaking, part of a process of interracial cross-fertilization, or a form of "high art." The interest groups that shaped these discourses were distinguished by class, race, gender, aesthetic values, and area of expertise, and I will show how these evolving discourses served to keep quiltmaking useful to differing groups in a changing society.

### *Omission from Quilt Histories: 1910s to 1950s*

Far from recognizing a distinctive African American quilt style, early quilt histories barely acknowledged any African American participation in quiltmaking (Webster [1915] 1990; Finley [1929] 1970; Hall and Kretsinger [1935] 1988; Dunton 1946; Ickis [1949] 1959; Peto 1949). In spotlighting elegant heirloom quilts owned by the typically elite white authors, their acquaintances, and museums, these books tended to exclude black women, working-class white women, and quilts intended for everyday household use (see Figure 1). Quiltmaking, the books suggested, fostered qualities that the model U.S. homemaker should have—refinement (taste and artistry), industry (thrift and virtue), and patriotism (Klassen 2006:84–5). In the first quilt history, published in 1915, Marie Webster wrote that the increasing popularity of quiltmaking "should be a source of much satisfaction to all patriotic Americans who believe that the true source of our nation's strength lies in keeping the family hearth flame bright" ([1915] 1990:xxii). Likewise, a pattern booklet published during World War II stated, "The making of quilts is an art which warms the hearts of Americans because it is so closely entwined with the history of our country. A list of quilt names kindles the imagination and re-creates the spirit, the vision, the humor, the love of home, the faith and the courage that made our country great" (Spool Cotton Company 1942:1). The distinctive historical experience of African American quiltmakers fell below the radar of these authors.

If mentioned at all in these early histories, African American women generally were portrayed as slaves or servants (Hall and Kretsinger [1935] 1988:23; Dunton 1946:87–8, 271; Ickis [1949] 1959:221; Peto 1949:19, 38–9). For example, as Florence Peto states in *American Quilts and Coverlets*, "Southern women had their Negro slaves pick seeds out of cotton and nothing but hand-picked padding went into a best quilt made south of the Mason and Dixon line" (1949:19). In *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them*, Ruth E. Finley cites an 1819 pink-and-white Double Pyramid quilt made in Virginia as "an excellent example of the type of exquisite needlework done by the mistresses of the great plantations of the South" ([1929] 1970:39). Where later authors sometimes attribute elegant plantation quilts to slave seamstresses, these earlier ones do not mention this possibility (Chase 1971:85–8; Kentucky Quilt Project [1982] 1992:25; Ramsey and Waldvogel 1986:2–3; Roberson 1988:59, 61; Fry 1990; Williams 1992:34; Allen and Tuckhorn 1995:32–3, 64–5; Johnson 2001:21–4; Weinraub 2006:57, 80–1, 154).<sup>2</sup>

African American participation in quiltmaking is recognized overtly in William Rush Dunton Jr.'s *Old Quilts* (1946), but it is portrayed purely as support for European





Figure 1. Polk's Fancy, anon., ca. 1850. This quilt, purchased from an Indiana dealer, is in one of the fancy quilt styles featured in early quilt histories. This commemorative pattern was used by several white quiltmakers in southeastern Indiana at the time of the Mexican War, when James K. Polk was president. Owner: Teri Klassen. Photo credit: Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.

American quiltmakers-designers. Dunton writes that several fancy quilts pictured in the book were designed by Achsah Goodwin Wilkins (1775–1854), a white woman, and made “under her direction by a group of young colored girls, possibly slaves, who had been trained by her. It is well known that many slaves were expert in various lines” (1946:187–8). Considering whether Achsah Wilkins’s sister could have made some of the quilts, Dunton says, “It may have been that she was quite as expert as Achsah and her aides, but for some reason I like to think that Achsah with her able corps of assistants turned out a considerable number of quilts and coverlets” (1946:271). Here, black women are presented as competent and industrious, but when they are portrayed only as an anonymous “corps of assistants,” their access to taste and refinement is curtailed. Those traits are reserved for the white quiltmaker-designer, as described in this excerpt

from the biographical sketch of Wilkins written by her daughter, whom the text describes as "Mrs. Allen Bowie Davis": "My mother was a very superior woman, possessing strong sense, sound judgment, great dignity, remarkably self-possessed. . . . She most frequently beguiled her weary hours of sickness by designing and laying out fancy spreads in which she displayed beautiful taste" (Dunton 1946:203). In Dunton's representation of quiltmaking, Wilkins and her "assistants" together comprise the ideal homemaker. Wilkins contributed artistry, the African American seamstresses industry.

At this stage, quilt historians seemed not to consider the possibility that African Americans could have participated in quilt design or could have made quilts independently, although fieldworkers in the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration had documented that black women had been making quilts since before the Civil War (see, for example, Baker 2000:61, 82, 100, 105–6, 224; Yetman 2002:89). They did not notice a distinctive African American quiltmaking style or credit African Americans with helping to shape the national quiltmaking tradition. The informal scholars who documented quiltmaking in this period were not concerned with critiquing U.S. society but with upholding and valorizing it. In this context, quiltmaking had an established meaning that served the interests of those who wanted to maintain the existing social order.

Although the model homemaker in the national mainstream advertisements and illustrations of the early to mid-1900s was white, elegant, and suburban, quiltmaking was a means by which African American women could access taste and refinement privately and locally (Bogart 1995:53, 68 fig. 1.21; Kitch 2001:136–81).<sup>3</sup> That quiltmaking is a cultural practice with the potential to bridge racial boundaries is demonstrated by accounts of a white Tennessee woman and her former slave who continued to make quilts and coverlets together after the Civil War, of integrated quilt groups in Maryland (in the 1940s and 1950s) and southern Indiana (from the 1930s to the 1970s), of African American women who won prizes in quilt contests in Maryland (around 1950) and Indiana (around 1930), and of pattern exchanges between black and white women in Tennessee in the 1980s (Lohrenz and Stamper 1989:5–8; Ramsey 1989:18–20; Freeman 1996:13–5; Klassen 2003:3–7). While there was social pressure on all quiltmakers to follow mainstream fashions and needlework norms, black women who wanted to counter stereotypes of African Americans as primitive had an extra incentive to do so.

During this period, the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits sowed the seeds of cultural critique that gave rise to later scholarly work that interpreted a certain quilt style as evidence of African retentions in African American folk art. In *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), he rejected the then-common scholarly notion that exposure to Western culture had squelched the African cultural heritage of U.S. African Americans. In *Cultural Relativism*, a book of essays written from 1942 to 1962, he argued that African cultures were complex and sophisticated, albeit nonliterate, and that appreciation of diverse cultures "gives us a leverage to lift us out of the ethnocentric morass in which our thinking about ultimate values has for so long bogged down" (1972:25–30, 34). Bridging World War II and the Vietnam War, this approach challenged the conventional wisdom and provided a paradigm for a wave of studies of African American arts and crafts by a later generation of scholars.

### *Participation in Mainstream Quiltmaking: 1960s and 1970s*

Mainstream recognition of African American women as quiltmakers in their own right began in the 1960s against a backdrop of the civil rights, black power, and women's liberation movements. Various figures during this period interpreted African American quiltmaking as a black family tradition or a southern black folk art (which reflected popular culture conceptions of quiltmaking generally but with the added component of race) or as the work of slave seamstresses or an expression of African heritage (which tended to other it by foregrounding distinctively African American historical experience). It was the emerging theme of African heritage that became the dominant representation of the 1980s and 1990s.

The dominance of the participation approach in the 1960s and 1970s is demonstrated by the experience of the Freedom Quilting Bee, a commercial enterprise of rural black women begun in the Gee's Bend area of Alabama in 1966. Freedom Bee quilts that were made to designer specifications and advertised as heirloom quilts in traditional styles were sold for several years by department stores (Callahan 1987:246, 84). But white civil rights worker Nancy Scheper-Hughes, now an anthropologist, could not persuade New England craft shops, art galleries, and antique stores to carry Freedom Bee "extra" quilts, "seconds" or "thirds," which she framed as pop art or exotic art (2003:19). These retailers were "[s]tymied by . . . second hand fabrics, the uneven sizes and irregular stitching," and "garish" colors, and they "could not see the ragged rhythms, the counterpoint, the atonal, call-and-response style of these African American beauties," she wrote later (2003:19). The unregulated Freedom Bee quilts thus were seen not as a legitimate alternative form but as unskilled participation in mainstream quiltmaking, unworthy of public consumption.

Black author Alice Walker used quilts as a symbol of black family tradition in her story "Everyday Use," first published in 1967 ([1967] 1973). White researcher Judith Wragg Chase included woven coverlets and quilts made by slaves in her book *Afro-American Art and Craft* (1971). White quilt historian Lenice Ingram Bacon recognized ongoing African American participation in quiltmaking ranging from the antebellum period (when among rich planter families, she states, "it was only natural that the slaves were taught to do fine needlework and become proficient in the art of quilt-making") to the then-contemporary (noting that the "Martin Luther King Freedom Quilting Bee in Alberta, Alabama," has "twenty-five members [who] spend up to seven hours a day producing quilts that are merchandised through stores in the East") ([1973] 1980:69, 131). The 1976 catalogue for a Georgia folk art exhibition showed four quilts made by African Americans and included an article by black folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry on nineteenth-century black quiltmaker Harriet Powers (Fry 1976). From 1977 to 1980, an exhibit of quilts made by low-income African Americans in southwestern Mississippi, curated by black freelance folklorist Roland Freeman, appeared at the Smithsonian Institution and traveled to mostly academic venues around the United States (Freeman 1981). Finally, white folklorist John Michael Vlach emphasized African influences in interpreting quilts for his groundbreaking traveling exhibit, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1978).

As African American women of the rural South began to gain some recognition as independent participants in the mainstream U.S. quiltmaking tradition and access the model homemaker role publicly, the public valuing of domestic handiwork and of women's role as homemaker generally was at a low ebb. This devaluing reflected challenges to traditional notions of femininity and domesticity by the women's liberation movement. The status of quiltmaking in this era is illustrated by quiltmaker Lavenia English Norris's decision around 1970 to sell her quilts at a yard sale. "I used to have a lot of them, and I used to quilt, too," said Norris, an African American born in Mitchell, Indiana, in 1920. "Got rid of all that stuff, I'm into modern stuff" (quoted in Klassen 2003:6). During the 1960s and 1970s, a period that encompassed the flurry of commemorative quiltmaking that accompanied the U.S. bicentennial, scholars raised awareness of African American participation in traditional mainstream quiltmaking, but they did so at a time when traditional quiltmaking itself was seen as an old-fashioned folk art (for examples of bicentennial quilts, see Holland 1978; Bishop and Houck 1986:47–50). Amid the upheaval of the civil rights movement, these associations with quiltmaking both valorized and assimilated African Americans, countering images of blacks that framed them as a threat to the social order and linking them to a nostalgic, patriotic symbol of stability and continuity.

Two developments in this period paved the way for the interpretations of the 1980s, which elevated and othered black quiltmaking by representing it as an expression of an African aesthetic rather than one from the Western quilt world. I use the term "quilt world" here to refer to networks of women (including whites and blacks) who maintain a locally variable body of quiltmaking knowledge through family heritage, quilt groups, quilt classes, quilt shops, fairs, quilt shows, and popular culture sources such as newspaper columns, magazines, mail-order kits, books, and television. Until the 1980s, taste arbiters in this world generally were white. The rise of the art-quilt movement in the 1970s paved the way for the celebratory African interpretation by diffusing the authority of quilt-world standards (Laury 1970; Holstein 1991:12, 20; Ramsey 1994). The art-quilt movement offered an alternative aesthetic system to that of the quilt world, one that was more open to inconsistency and experimentation.

The other development that set the stage for the theme of "separation from mainstream quiltmaking" was the growing recognition among scholars that an African heritage had influenced not just African American music, dance, religious and magical beliefs, and oral traditions, as Herskovits had proposed, but material art forms as well (Herskovits 1941:111, 136–7). In an important article that argued this point, art historian Robert Farris Thompson noted that the Smithsonian Institution had recently acquired an African American quilt that had similarities to "the chiefly textiles of Dahomey in West Africa" ([1969] 1983:58). Soon after, Chase (1971) mentioned appliqué traditions in early Egypt, Europe, and Dahomey in her discussion of slave quiltmaking, Fry (1976) included a section on "African Continuity" in her article on the Powers quilts (one of which was the quilt Thompson had mentioned), white folklorist Mary Twining (1977) included quilts in her doctoral dissertation on African retentions in the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands, and Vlach used the notion of an African aesthetic to interpret quilts in his 1978 exhibit catalogue. Given

this work and that of the art-quilt movement, it was a natural progression by the end of the 1970s for scholars interested in cultural critique and the valorization of ethnic or racial minorities to describe the improvisational quilts of working-class African American women as African-influenced and as art.

### *Separation from Mainstream Quiltmaking: 1980s and 1990s*

By 1980, some scholars were recognizing a certain quilt style used by working-class African Americans as a new category of material culture, one that they perceived as visibly distinguishable from mainstream quilts due to traits that they attributed to African heritage. By celebrating a quilt style that had an improvisational, contingent aesthetic and that often incorporated old clothes, household linens, and feed- or flour-sacks, these scholars challenged and even inverted quilt-world values. By those standards, labor-intensive fancy quilts are appropriate for public display; quilts made for everyday household use and composed of whatever materials are available are not. As awareness of this new configuration diffused through the quilt world, quiltmakers and quilt historians who were invested in its established value system (but knew little of African art) challenged the interpretations of the scholars, who had credentials in folklore and art history but were quilt-world outsiders. Overall interest in African American quiltmaking grew steadily in this period, as indicated by the proliferation of publications and exhibits listed in black quilt scholar Kyra Hicks's comprehensive bibliography, *Black Threads: An African American Quilting Sourcebook*, which includes a timeline (2003:207–25).

While the separation trope dominated, some scholars retained the past emphasis on African American participation. White quilt historian Bets Ramsey documented the existence of integrated quiltmaker networks in an article related to her exhibit, *Country to City: Changing Styles in Afro-American Quilts*. Lillie Johnson "exchanges patterns with her friends, both black and white," Ramsey said, and Lillian Beattie "learned to piece quilts as a girl while living in the household of a white family in Athens, Tennessee" (1989:18, 20). The work of white folklorist William Ferris (1982) also continued the earlier participation theme. He posits an interracial southern folk art tradition in which black quiltmaker Pecolia Warner's quilt-world competence is discernible in her use of standard patterns (Log Cabin, Star) and the string-quilt style (1982:xix, xxiii).

The idea that African American quiltmaking was a separate tradition from white quiltmaking was advanced most visibly in books by white scholars Vlach and Thompson, who had studied African American folk culture and African art, respectively, but not quilt history. Like Herskovits (1941, 1966, 1972), they viewed descendants of African slaves in the Americas as culture bearers of sophisticated African civilizations.<sup>4</sup> Following Vlach's discussion in the 1978 exhibit catalogue, the African interpretation of certain African American quilts received further validation in Thompson's book, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983). This study evaluates African influences on African American arts in the United States, Central America, South America, Haiti, and Cuba. This approach was extensively developed by Thompson's student, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and also figured in Fry's book



on slave quiltmaking (1990). Wahlman finished her dissertation on African American quiltmaking in 1980. She wrote essays on African American quilt aesthetics for the catalogue that accompanied Freeman's Mississippi quilt exhibit (1981) and (with John Scully) for *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts* (1983), a volume edited by Ferris, and she published a catalogue for the exhibit *Ten Afro-American Quilters* (1983).

These scholars sought to discern an African aesthetic, which they felt was expressed through certain traits that distinguish some quilts made by African Americans from mainstream traditional quilts. Wahlman specifies five such traits at one point: "dominance of strips"; "bright, highly contrasting colors"; "large design elements"; "off-set designs"; and "multiple patterning" (1981:7). Elsewhere she removes "off-set designs" and adds "asymmetry," "improvisation," and "symbolic forms" (1993:vii). Thompson sees African influences on quilts from Suriname in "color-clashing, alternation of patterned and unpatterned strips, and staggered accents" and says that "[t]he traits that announce an African quotient in Suriname are also present in U.S. black quilt-top making" (1983:218). As specific evidence of African influence on a U.S. black textile, he follows Vlach in noting the unmatched, or "staggered," pattern lines along the center seam of an "Africanizing" blanket woven about 1890 by Luiza Combs of Hazard, Kentucky (1983:218-9; see Figure 2).

By contrast, European American-style quilts, in Vlach's words, "tend to draw their designs into a tight and ordered symmetry" and have a "strict formality." Citing Henry Glassie, he says, "Rigid, uniform repetition and predictability are definite characteristics of Western folk art," and then asserts, "The same is true of the Euro-American quilt" (1978:67). Concluding the section on quilts, Vlach says: "What may in the end be regarded as the most important feature of Afro-American quilting is the apparent refusal to simply surrender an alternative aesthetic sense to the confines of mainstream expectations. Euro-American forms were converted so that African ideas would not be lost" (1978:75). He thus presumes a homogeneous mainstream of exclusively European American quiltmaking conventions and suggests that black quiltmakers who follow them have selected against their African heritage.

Starting in the late 1980s, both black and white authors incorporated these ideas into books concerned exclusively with African American quiltmaking. White California quilt collector Eli Leon's book, *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking* ([1987] 1990), had an introduction written by Thompson and accompanied an exhibit at the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum. The focus was on contemporary quilts made by low-income blacks originally from the rural South, many of whom had relocated to California. Fry presented quilts and coverlets made by slaves in *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (1990). She saw "representations of the sun, the Congo cross, and the frequent use of red and white," the "snake motif," and "intricate flower patterns" as references to African cosmology and mythology (1990:7, 44-5, 53), and she further proposed "that the appliqué tradition that flourished in the American South was brought over by slaves from Benin (formerly known as Dahomey)" (12, 83). Wahlman published *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*, evoking her Africanist genealogy with her expression of thanks to Herskovits's daughter, Jean, "for the gift of a Brazilian doll dressed as a Yoruba priestess" (1993:x, 31).



Figure 2. Housetop/Log Cabin variation, Maggie Holloway Tyus, western Tennessee, 1960s. This tied quilt made by an African American woman has traits said by some scholars to express an improvisational aesthetic rooted in African heritage. The owner says that Maggie Tyus, her grandmother, also made more formal quilts. Owner: Jeanette Holloway. Photo credit: Teri Klassen.

Rebuttals to the Africanist ideas were launched starting in the mid-1980s by quilt-makers and quilt historians, including several African American makers of art quilts. The art-quilt style, used primarily for wall hangings, generally lacks the contingent and improvisational qualities of the quilts said to exhibit an unconscious African aesthetic. The black art-quilt makers tended to live in urban areas and have middle-class and professional backgrounds, whereas the quilt style said to exhibit Africanisms was more common among women from the rural South (including some who had relocated to northern cities) who had lower education and income levels (Berlo 2003:28).

There were three major objections to the Africanist interpretation. One was that the Africanisms also appeared in quilts made by white quiltmakers (Roach 1986:228–32; Ramsey 1989:22; Williams 1992:98). In noting similarities between contemporary white- and black-made quilts in northern Louisiana, white folklorist Susan Roach





Figure 3. Log Cabin variation, Mary Kauffman Goering, central Kansas, 1940s. This tied quilt shows how some white women—including its American Mennonite maker, who was of Swiss German heritage—have made quilts with irregularities that might result from an improvisational approach. Mary Goering, my grandmother, also made more formal quilts. Owner and photo credit: Teri Klassen.

suggested that scholars who earlier had observed substantial stylistic differences may have assumed that all European Americans made the kind of formal, fancy quilts that were prevalent in the literature. She wrote that Vlach, “one of the first to posit such differences” (and a member of her dissertation supervisory committee), attributed these similarities to the fact that she was looking at quilts made by blacks and whites who lived in the same area (1986:229). Apparently, then, some of the stylistic differences were due not (or not only) to African heritage but to regional conventions, and also perhaps to the differences between fancy quilts and quilts with a contingency aesthetic that were intended for everyday use (see Figure 3). Roach did note some differences between black and white quiltmakers in her study area:

northern Louisiana black quiltmakers tended to improvise more and emphasize “quilting” (the stitches that hold the three layers together) less than European American quiltmakers did (1986:229–30). Significant in this historically particular study is Roach’s attention to quilting design (the stitches that hold the layers together) as potentially diagnostic evidence of historical experience and cultural antecedents.

Like Roach, Ramsey found a significant overlap in black and white quilt traits. Comparing a circa 1870 quilt made by European American Iora Almina Philo Pool of Sunbright, Tennessee, to a circa 1910 quilt that Vlach attributes to an anonymous black quiltmaker in Triune, Tennessee, which is about 150 miles away from Sunbright, she notes that Pool’s quilt also has “African” elements of “strip arrangement, multiplicity of pattern, improvisation, and off-center placement” (Ramsey 1989:22; Vlach 1978:74, 138a, 165). Ramsey suggested that those who had found significant differences “did their research in predominately black communities having little interaction with white people. This may account for their finding a greater continuity of traditional African concepts. Or it may mean the people there have less regard for conformity to Anglo-American standards of quilting” (1989:21). Significant in Ramsey’s work is recognition of the diversity of African American quilts (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. LeMoyne Star, Rosa Lee Morton, west Tennessee, ca. 1960. This quilt shows how some African American women, including its maker, have participated in more formal mainstream quilt styles. Owner: Goldie Harwell. Photo credit: Teri Klassen.

The diversity theme is also taken up by white art historian Eva Ungar Grudin in the exhibit catalogue, *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts* (1990). Whereas "mainstream quilters prefer soft colors to 'loud' ones and delicate designs to bold" (1990:9), and whereas "American mainstream tradition" prescribes "small invisible stitches" (12), the quilts in the exhibit are "marvelously diverse. . . . Some are refined and subtle, others rugged and rough-hewn. Some are vividly colored, others soft and muted. Some display patterns and block styles familiar to the most conservative quilters. Others are totally idiosyncratic" (10). Here Grudin essentializes white quiltmakers as a compulsive, homogeneous, and conventionally feminine lot while strongly countering any stereotyping of black quiltmakers.

The crux of the second objection to the Africanist scholars, to which Grudin seems to respond, was that they had stereotyped African American quilts based on an unrepresentatively homogeneous sample (Benberry 1992:15; German 1994; Ramsey 1989). Discussing the impact of Wahlman's list of traits, Hicks observes, "For many years there would be debate about the authenticity of African American quilts that may or may not conform to such a narrow definition" (2003:218). Among the protestors were black art quiltmaker Sandra K. German, who says in an essay published in the American Quilt Study Group journal *Uncoverings*, "The reduction of African American quiltmaking to a quantifiable, simplistic caricature is a travesty which sets the stage for convenient, trivial, and lucrative rip-offs such as 'Afro-American style quilts' and instruction in 'How to make an Afro-American quilt'" (1994:142). Here German links the perceived stereotyping and subsequent popularization of the idea of a distinctive African American quiltmaking style to commercial exploitation.

The third objection to the African interpretation was the perception that the scholars had ignored the quiltmakers themselves (Benberry 1992; German 1994; Mazloomi 1998). This issue apparently targeted Vlach or Thompson (or perhaps both), since Twining, Wahlman, and Leon had interviewed quiltmakers and Fry had drawn extensively from WPA-era interviews with ex-slaves. Said black quilt historian Cuesta Benberry, "Long established canons of quilt history research, such as determining the quiltmaker's identity, the quilt's provenance, date of making and fabric content, were no longer deemed essential" (1992:15). Benberry's focus here is on methodology. Casting Africanist scholars in the role of the other, black art-quilt maker Carolyn Mazloomi added a component of intellectual property rights to the critique, saying that members of the Women of Color Quilters Network "scoffed at the phenomenon of outsiders creating the definition for something alien to their own cultural references" (1998:14). This group, which eventually numbered more than 1,500, began in the mid-1980s, in part to resist being pigeonholed by Africanist scholars and in part to remedy a feeling of exclusion or difference from predominantly white quilt institutions such as guilds and shows (German 1994:145–52).

Published statements of black art-quilt makers indicate that they wanted to be valued as productive participants in the U.S. quiltmaking tradition, rather than as people who were operating outside of it, and as Mazloomi suggests above, they wanted to determine the meaning of their quilts themselves. Benberry takes a similar position in her introduction to the catalogue for an exhibit of African American quilts, arguing that the quilts are distinctive but should not be seen as "exotic":

It is important to listen to what African-American quiltmakers say about their work and to give them credence, whether or not their comments coincide with researchers' theories and interpretations. It is certainly not useful to view African-American quilts merely as isolated folk art objects, divorced from the lives of blacks and the social, political and economic conditions under which they have lived. A small percentage of African-American quilts are visually exotic; the majority are not. . . . The quilts represent a diverse body of work by an ethnic group distinguished for its lengthy participation in American quilting. The record should so state, and then African-American quilts and quiltmakers will begin to attain their rightful place in American quilt history. (1992:16)

Similar ideas are also developed by black art-quilt maker Faith Ringgold in her preface to *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts*, a book that pictures art quilts made by members of the Women of Color Quilters Network. There, she says that, "[a]long with jazz, quilting is the uniquely American contribution to world art that bears the legacy of our African heritage and carries it into our common future" (1998:8; emphasis added). By celebrating African heritage as a trait that allows African American quiltmakers to contribute distinctively to U.S. quilting, this stance synthesizes elements of the participation and separation tropes and points to the emerging period of "interracial cross-fertilization." Additional documentation of the diversity of African American quilts appeared in Freeman's *A Communion of the Spirits* (1996), a nationwide survey of African American quiltmakers and quilts in both alternative and mainstream styles, and in white museum curator Marsha L. MacDowell's book, *African American Quilting in Michigan* (1997) (see Figure 5).

Outside of the quilt world, methodological objections to the African-survival perspective on African American arts have been raised by white ethnographers Richard Price and Sally Price, whose research area is Maroon culture in Suriname. Referring to the approach of Thompson and others, they write:

We have argued that this research procedure, an ideologically driven enterprise in which similar looking pieces are juxtaposed as evidence of specific historical connection, relies on methodological practices and conceptual premises that are flawed. It is based on a biased selection of examples; it infers specific historical continuities on the basis of visual similarity; it underestimates Maroon agency and creativity; and in focusing on form rather than process, it misconstrues the nature of cultural change. (1999:293–6)

Particularly relevant to the current study is the Prices' account of an instance in which Africanist scholars overlooked a possible local cultural influence (Amerindian) in characterizing a Maroon art form (stools) as an African survival (1999:297–8).

A tendency to ignore an artist's local community also has characterized some proponents of the African quilt interpretation in the United States. In his preface to Leon's book, Thompson asserts the persistence of African consciousness while skipping over generations of often-intimate interactions between black and white quiltmakers:

If Americans think of Africa as a classical antecedent at all, they do so frequently in terms of the latter's subordination or irrelevance. They assume "tribal" Africa was



Figure 5. African Women Strolling on the Beach, Mildred Hopkins-Calender, Chicago, ca. 2000. This wall hanging, which the maker says was inspired by a now lost commercial design, shows how she and other African American women have participated in the art quilt movement and sometimes intentionally reference Africa in their work. Owner: Beverly Calender-Anderson. Photo credit: Teri Klassen.

somehow committed to stasis . . . whereas Europe was committed to novelty.

A cursory glance at the mind of black women in America, as embedded in the beat and colors of their quilts, rebuts such nonsense. They too seek the new and so did their ancestors. . . .

From Africa streamed to North America a percussive manner of handling textile color. Colors coordinate by clashing. Colors make their entrance in full sonority; they attack the eye with high-decibel reverberations. ([1987] 1990:17)

The breathtaking essentializing in the above passage is encapsulated in the use of the singular “mind” to represent the many tastes and styles of generations of African American quiltmakers across the United States. A similarly monolithic representation occurs in an earlier article by Thompson: “Slavery and crypto-slavery might have destroyed those realities by which *the Afro-American* experienced self-awareness had it not been for his profound and intractable sense of beauty” ([1969] 1983:58; emphasis added). In these instances, race-based collective identity apparently was a component of valorization.

In a *Journal of American Folklore* review of the *Who'd a Thought It* exhibit and catalogue, Lillian Chaveas, a student of Vlach's, expressed more skepticism than Thompson did about Leon's premise. While praising the quilts as “lively, colorful, and intense,” she found the catalogue's discussion of African influences to be “confusing and subjective” (1992:478–9). Of the exhibit, she said, “Apparently the improvisation and the ‘flexible patterning’ and the ‘innovations that originate beyond the conscious domain’ come from Africa. Exactly how was not clearly explained”



(479). Other than critiquing the Africanist evidence and noting that the quilts “simultaneously seemed familiar and foreign,” Chaveas says nothing about the issue of regional or historical context or antecedents (478). With no new context to frame their work, the quiltmakers remained apparently traditionless.

Price and Price do not cite Franz Boas, but he addressed issues related to theirs in an 1896 paper titled “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology.” Although his intent was to criticize the evolutionist tendency to assume that similar phenomena in differing cultures have a common origin, his insights can be applied to the presumption that similarities between certain African American quilts and certain African textiles are attributable to the African heritage of African Americans. Boas says that an investigator must distinguish “between the indiscriminate use of similarities of culture for proving historical connection and the careful and slow detailed study of local phenomena” ([1940] 1968:277). Like the Prices, he emphasizes the need to study historical process before developing theory: “If anthropology desires to establish the laws governing the growth of culture it must not confine itself to comparing the results of the growth alone, but whenever such is feasible it must compare the processes of growth, and these can be discovered by means of studies of the cultures of small geographical areas” ([1940] 1968:280). If Africanist quilt scholars and collectors had adopted the historical approach touted here, they would have confronted a complex web of influences bearing on the many quilt styles used by, but not necessarily unique to, African Americans.

Although not addressed in their discourse, a serious consequence of the Africanist representation was that it threatened traditional social uses of quiltmaking by African American women. By differentiating between blacks and whites and between working-class and middle-class blacks, by making primarily low-income African American women choose, in effect, between pride in heritage and participation in mainstream society, the Africanist view complicated their use of quiltmaking as (1) a tool for participation, recognition, and acceptance in mainstream society; (2) a means of accessing model homemaker status; and (3) a social activity that they had used in segregated society to affirm each other and build self-esteem (Ramsey 1989; Lohrenz and Stamper 1989:5–8; Hindman 1993; MacDowell 1997; Klassen 2003).

Some insight into these uses comes from the following account of how Mazloomi and some black quiltmaker friends felt when, around 1986, they visited an exhibit of African American quilts whose curator had sought to emphasize Africanisms:

One of the first things I noticed was that the quilts in Eli Leon’s collection were very much unlike my own, or those of the other women of the AAQLA [African American Quilters of Los Angeles]. Everybody was abuzz!

Then we viewed the faces of a group of white women who had come to the show from a large, traditional quilt guild. You could just see the horror on those faces! . . . It was as if they were asking whether all African American quilters produced only the seemingly haphazard, irregular and impromptu-style quilts portrayed in the show. (German 1994:155)

Grudin reports that African American quiltmaker Yvonne Wells, “who works in an idiosyncratic style,” has had similar reactions from “traditional” quiltmakers who

see her quilts. Grudin quotes her as saying, "They sort of cringe" (Grudin 1990:9–10). These accounts illustrate the potential of the scholarly reordering of value systems to complicate relations between white and black quiltmakers and between black makers of quilts in "African" versus "non-African" styles. Benberry speaks to the issue in her foreword to Mazloomi's book on African American art quilts, saying that Africanist quilt scholars had meant no harm, but that they

were guilty of an innocent arrogance. They believed that through their scholarly analysis they could determine certain qualities that were inherent in the work of black, as opposed to white, American quilters. But ironically, because these scholars discounted the larger, more diverse body of African American quilters in favor of a small subgroup, their impact on the community they sought to recognize was adverse. Black quilters whose works did not conform to the scholars' criteria were relegated to an artistic limbo, where their quilts were regarded as neither authentic African American nor mainstream American fabrications. (1998:10–1)

The African representation tended to erode the common ground between black and white women, who had long participated in the same tradition of quiltmaking: sharing patterns, using the same published sources, buying the same fabrics, sewing occasionally in integrated quilt groups, and passing quilts back and forth as gifts or as paid piecework (Lohrenz and Stamper 1989:5–8; Ramsey 1989:18; Freeman 1996:13–5; Beardsley et al. 2002a:323; Klassen 2003; Weinraub 2006:168–70; P. Arnett, Cubbs, and Metcalf 2006:158, 174, 190, 192, 212).

The Africanist quilt scholars were at a far cultural remove from the quiltmakers whose work they were interpreting and from the quilt world generally. Lacking insider knowledge of quiltmaking, they applied ideas from their own context of a then-current scholarly paradigm and, apparently, from quilt history books that reflected the context of their elite authors more than that of ordinary quiltmakers. If the scholars had conducted fieldwork with interracial cross-sections of quiltmakers in rural southern communities, or if early quilt history and folk art books had pictured rural southern quilts made by lower-income white women for everyday use, it is likely that they would have come across Africanisms in quilts and coverlets made by white women and possibly by American Indian women (see Hemming 1997:108). In that case, they would have faced the question of whether the so-called African traits discussed above could have been accessed through particular European immigrant, American Indian, or regional U.S. cultural traditions as well as through, or as a result of having blended with, African antecedents.

While building on one Herskovits tenet, that of African retentions in the New World, Africanist quilt scholars seemed to ignore two other issues that he raised: "the seemingly baffling fact, so often encountered, that given traits of New World Negro, and especially of American Negro behavior, are ascribable equally to European and African origin"; and the possibility that "the aboriginal African endowment . . . [might] in certain respects, . . . have been transmitted to the whites, thus making the result of contact [i.e., the "mainstream" quiltmaking tradition] an exchange of culture" (Herskovits 1941:18, 29–30). Sixty-five years later, in a book aimed at quiltmakers as well as quilt historians, white quilt studies scholar Barbara Brackman raises similar issues:



"One can point to similarities between American quilts and African textiles, but it is difficult to determine whether one culture's ideas are derived from another's, which direction the influence traveled, or whether pattern similarities are mere coincidence" (2006:51). To productively evaluate the role of an unconscious, immutable, culture- or race-based African aesthetic heritage in African American quiltmaking, scholars need to consider all the various cultural heritages and mass media resources that have interacted in communities where African American quiltmakers and their various African, European, and American Indian ancestors have lived. It is also important to recognize that the fancy quilts seen in many museums and quilt history books are inadequate representatives of the "mainstream" U.S. quiltmaking tradition.

Africanisms in European American quilts and in woven coverlets, including "staggered" lines along the center seams of coverlets, can be seen in the Tennessee, Florida, West Virginia, Mississippi, and Georgia state quilt books and in a book that extensively documents Tennessee weavers (Wilson and Kennedy 1983:40, 50, 70, 72, 73, 74, 83; Ramsey and Waldvogel 1986:33 fig. 34, 35 fig. 35; Williams 1992:73 plate 43, 77 plate 47, 96 plate 57; Valentine 2000:29 fig. WVHQS 30258 [coverlet], 67 fig. WVHQS 50628 [coverlet], 147 fig. WVHQS 20023, 150 fig. WVHQS 40035; Johnson 2001:111 fig. 5.14, 112 fig. 5.15, 113 fig. 5.17, 140 fig. 6.14; Weinraub 2006:137 fig. 5.8, 196 fig. 8.7). Although these books were not available to early Africanist quilt interpreters, contingency-style quilts made by European Americans appeared in a Renwick Gallery exhibit that circulated from 1972 to 1974 and in its catalogue (Holstein 1972:36 fig. 26, 38 fig. 28, 55 fig. 47, 65 fig. 57, 79 fig. 72, 89 fig. 83).

While the African representation created tensions between certain social groups, it brought affirmation and in some cases financial rewards to some low-income African American quiltmakers. It also had the probably unforeseen consequence of goading primarily urban, middle-class African American quiltmakers to become more publicly vocal, publishing their own interpretations of their work as well as their responses to those of others. In addition, it likely contributed to increased recognition from museums, collectors, and quilt book authors for African American quiltmakers and for quilts made with an informal or playful improvisational aesthetic. After consulting with Wahlman, for instance, white Alabama folk art dealer Robert Cargo began focusing on African American quilts that were "bold, eccentric, idiosyncratic, improvisational, [and] brightly colored" (International Quilt Study Center 2008). Many have "long stitches, unusual color combinations, asymmetrical arrangements, and . . . a lack of organization," which Cargo associates with an African heritage (Cargo 2001:1). In 2000, he gave a collection of 156 quilts to the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, on whose Web site they can be viewed (International Quilt Study Center 2007).<sup>5</sup> This authoritative venue thus represents African American quiltmaking in terms that were shaped by the Africanists' perspective.

To the extent that the Africanist discourse motivated people such as Cargo to explore and appreciate new contexts, it achieved the goal that Eversmann and her colleagues espoused for museums—to "help visitors develop their own skills in moving from personal contexts to cultural contexts if they are to discover many rich and varied interpretations of objects" (1997:165). In this case, the introduction of a new cultural form succeeded in changing value systems, although not always

in ways that scholarly interpreters had intended; indeed, they may have brought viewers closer to the contexts of the scholarly interpreters than to those of the object makers. When I asked Vlach in a conversation on February 12, 2005, whether, in light of challenges, he stood by his early work on African American quiltmaking, he said that, "I overreached all over the place because someone had to light the fire." In his view, the traveling exhibit and its catalogue had addressed the need for a less-Eurocentric vision of quiltmaking, although the vision had later required some fine-tuning.

Ferris's work with African American "folk" quiltmakers in Mississippi is an anomaly in this period. On the one hand, as editor of the book *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts* (1983), he includes Africanist essays by Thompson and by Wahlman and Scully, and he aligns himself with the separation approach in saying that black quiltmakers "select colors and pattern designs which are easily distinguished from white traditions in Amish and Appalachian communities" (1983:65; see also 107 n. 2 and 108 n. 9). On the other hand, though, he also includes Marie Jeanne Adams's article on a nineteenth-century black quiltmaker, which concludes, "How African influence may have reached Harriet Powers who was born in Georgia is problematic" (Adams [1979] 1983:74). Further, his introduction associates the quilts of African American Pecolia Warner with qualities of centrality, symmetry, and (on some quilts) "repeated small designs," and he makes no mention of African influence (Ferris 1983:4). As noted above, Ferris posits a common context for the six black and three white artists featured in another book that he published at this time, *Local Color: A Sense of Place in Folk Art: "the world of the back-country and untutored artists in Mississippi"* (1982:vii). He writes that "[b]lack and white artists share deep bonds in many areas" and does not specify the race of individual artists in his discussion of their work in the introduction (1982:xviii). Ferris's deferential, documentary approach is expressed in long transcriptions of interviews with artists, in which the artists tell the stories of their lives uninterrupted by scholarly interpretation.

This rather restrained, ethnographic, region- and lifestyle-based approach apparently did not appeal to scholars, academic publishers, and museum curators as much as the more ambitious and speculative Africanist work. One can imagine that themes of resistance found in the Africanist work may have aligned better with the practice-oriented scholarship emerging in the 1970s, which focused on the phenomena of agency and asymmetric power relations (Ortner 1984:144, 147). Whatever the reason, though, few African American quilt scholars followed Ferris's approach during this period.

Whereas the three dominant representations of African American quiltmaking discussed above can be found in a range of sources in their respective periods (books, articles, and exhibits), the themes that shaped the discourse from 1999 to the present were generated primarily by two events—the publication of Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard's book *Hidden in Plain View* (1999) and the mounting of the Gee's Bend quilt exhibits, which traveled the United States from 2002 to 2008. *Hidden in Plain View* and the Gee's Bend exhibits brought unprecedented attention to African American quiltmaking and reached national markets through high-profile media outlets. I argue that the distinctive character and widespread distribution of these

representations, although generated by single phenomena and the many responses to them, justify treating them as dominant new discourses.

### *Interracial Cross-Fertilization: Circa 2000*

The publication of *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* catapulted the idea of African American quiltmaking into popular culture. In the book, African American quiltmakers are represented as slaves who not only are skilled users of white quilt patterns and techniques but who also imbue them with distinctive meanings tied to African American experience and African heritage. These meanings, in the form of a quilt code said to have been used by escaping slaves, were in turn integrated into contemporary mainstream culture through the popularity of the book. It was promoted by Oprah Winfrey, featured in *USA Today*, reprinted six times, had 207,000 copies in print by 2007, and gave rise to numerous quilt guild presentations and school lesson plans (Cohen 2007; see Figure 6).

The crux of the argument put forth by Tobin and Dobard is that slaves used quilt designs to communicate secretly among themselves about escape plans and that this occurred even before the establishment of the white abolitionist–powered Underground Railroad, which developed around 1830 (1999:67; Wright and Wonkeryor n.d.:2). Tobin, listed on the back cover of the book as “a teacher, collector, and writer of women’s

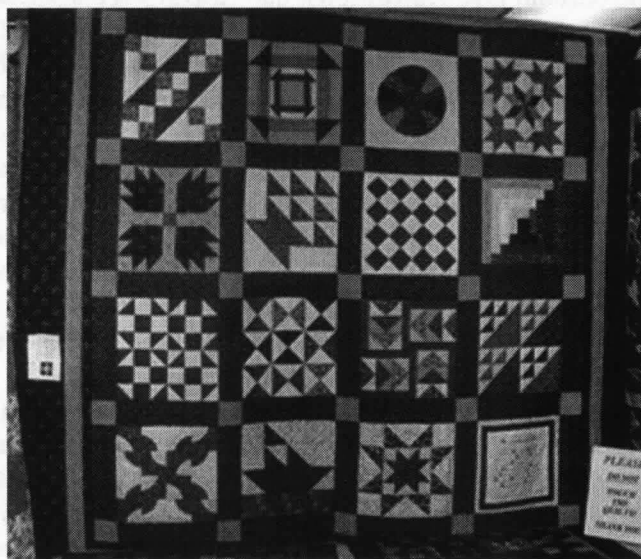


Figure 6. Underground Railroad Sampler, Lilla Boss, southeastern Indiana, 2005. Seen here at a quilt show in 2006, this quilt, which is based on a commercial design by Eleanor Burns and Sue Bouchard, illustrates the popularity of *Hidden in Plain View*'s concept of an Underground Railroad quilt code. A white woman made this quilt as part of a craft shop's block-a-month project, but many black women also have made Underground Railroad quilts. Owner: Lilla Boss. Photo credit: Teri Klassen.

stories," is said to have been told the quilt "code" by African American quilt dealer Ozella McDaniel Williams. Tobin talked to Williams at Charleston, South Carolina's Old Marketplace in 1994 and 1996 and at Williams's home in 1998, shortly before she died (1999:15, 21, 167). Consisting of verbal messages that reference pattern names and the spacing of knots, the code is said to have been passed down orally in Williams's family. Tobin, who is white, then asked Dobard, a black Howard University art history professor with expertise in quiltmaking, to help her interpret the information from Williams. Since they have access to no quilts that are known to have been made by slaves using code patterns, Tobin and Dobard lean heavily on Williams's oral testimony and on contextual information to make their case. One approach that they use is to postulate the meanings of code patterns. For instance, the Bear's Paw pattern is said to have indicated an escape route through the Appalachian Mountains, and Drunkard's Path is said to have recommended taking a zigzag route in order to confuse captors. A second approach is to show a tradition among both Africans and African Americans of using "mnemonic devices" to communicate secret meanings. In addition, Tobin and Dobard link specific pattern names and designs to African antecedents and use written accounts by Underground Railroad conductors, both white and black, to demonstrate that codes (numbers, lyrics of spirituals) were used in escapes.

Tobin and Dobard cite three earlier books, two dating to 1990 and one to 1993, that mention the idea of slaves using quilts to help them escape. In two of these, slaves make quilts that serve as maps. In the exhibit catalogue *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts* (Grudin 1990), Joyce Scott is quoted as saying that ancestors had told her mother, African American quiltmaker Elizabeth Talford Scott, that slaves made quilts that showed the layout of fields and used them to escape from the plantation (Scott quoted in Grudin 1990:32). A map-quilt also figures as an escape route in *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (Hopkinson 1993), a children's book. The cover blurb claims that the text is "based on a true, little-known chapter in African-American history," but it provides no specific source. Unlike these authors, Fry asserts that information about the Underground Railroad was expressed in quilt codes, not maps: "Quilts were used to send messages. On the underground railroad, those with the color black in them were hung on the line to indicate a place of refuge" (1990:65; see also the caption for fig. 75 on page 52). Fry does not cite the source for this information, but elsewhere she draws extensively from slave narratives.

Like the Africanists, Tobin and Dobard emphasize African American heritage and agency, but they offer a broader perspective and incorporate new evidence from the 1990s of the diversity of African American quiltmaking (e.g., Fry 1990; Grudin 1990; Benberry 1992; Freeman 1996; MacDowell 1997; Mazloomi 1998). The authors attempt to give African Americans what early quilt histories gave to European Americans: the use of quiltmaking as a source of honorable heritage, pride, distinctive identity, solidarity, stability, and continuity. They assure a (presumptively) African American readership that "[t]he stories (of our elders) are there; it remains for us to claim them" (1999:161) and quote from an earlier essay by Dobard:

The African American quilt is all too often dismissed as something old, tattered, discolored and "in pieces." We often fail to look deeper—fail to realize that which is old and torn is spiritually textured; that which is stained is marked by grace; and that

which is fragmented comes together to create something new, whole and beautiful. The quilt can be a visual metaphor for perseverance and continuity. The many scraps of fabric . . . usually have special meaning because they are taken from garments of deceased relatives or given as tokens of friendship. The quilt then becomes a visible and tangible link to the past and a connection to the future. (1997:xii; quoted in Tobin and Dobard 1999:159)

In constructing quilting as a shared heritage of African Americans, they cite a range of influences, including an African cultural heritage, European American quilting, and the contemporary mainstream art-quilt movement. Their story “reaches back to Africa and forward to the Carolinas, connecting African symbols to familiar quilt patterns” (1999:23). Of one contemporary black quiltmaker, they say, “It is the knowledge of American and African traditions that allows us to interpret Mrs. [Elizabeth] Scott’s quilts on so many levels” (1999:160). Of a professional African American art quiltmaker, they say, “[Faith] Ringgold, unlike some African American rural Southern quilters, is aware of her African heritage and draws from it consciously” (1999:155). With such statements, the book presents African heritage as a common denominator without neglecting the impact of centuries of New World experience.

Tobin and Dobard’s project could be read as a response to Herskovits’s conviction that, “To give the Negro a sense of his past is to endow him with the confidence in his own position in this country and in the world[,] which he must have” (1941:32). But whereas Herskovits located this past in “ancestral cultures of Africa and the survivals of Africanisms in the New World,” Tobin and Dobard’s vision is not so exclusively Afrocentric. Their more inclusive view of the African American past—as incorporating generations of participation in Western culture—offers a more nuanced valorization of black culture. It won support from both sides of the Africanist quilt debate, as Benberry and Wahlman both wrote forewords. Benberry focused on the validity of oral history, perhaps viewing the traditional nature of the code patterns as an affirmation of black participation in mainstream quilting (1999:1–3). Wahlman interpreted the use of encoded signals as an expression of African heritage (1999:7–13).

*Hidden in Plain View* presents slaves as agents rather than as passive victims, and it inverts racial hierarchy by positing an African American woman as the guru of a white woman. In the epilogue, authored by Tobin alone, she expresses her deference (and incidentally validates her own credentials as mediator) in statements such as, “I have been privileged by the gift of Ozella’s story and by her guiding words” (1999:164). In this African American—empowering framework, quilting is acknowledged publicly as a means of transcending skin-color boundaries, as it long had served in particular private and local contexts. This is expressed in the book’s integrated co-authorship and in this statement in Tobin’s epilogue that frames Williams as a New World version of an African storyteller: “Ozella had taken the tradition of the African griot to a level where, like the realm of the spirit, there is no separation by race. In telling me the story, Ozella moved beyond the strictures of the past” (1999:166).

Like the Africanist scholars, Tobin and Dobard had great success in appealing to their target audience but also received challenges, as several scholars protested inaccuracies in the book. Brackman noted that one of the quilt code patterns (Log Cab-



in) did not come into common use until after President Abraham Lincoln's election (1997:17). Black historian Giles R. Wright, director of the New Jersey Historical Society's Afro-American History Program, charged that, "This study greatly misrepresents the operation of the UGRR [Underground Railroad]" (Wright 2008). Among his many criticisms is the observation that runaways in the Charleston, South Carolina, area were more likely to try to pass as free blacks in Charleston or go north up the East Coast than to head for the Appalachian Mountains. He also notes that the monkey wrench, the tool for which one of the patterns is named, was invented around 1850, whereas the quilt code was supposed to be operating by 1830.

But the general public, including many quiltmakers and African Americans, was entranced with this unsuspected dimension of meaning hatched from an old familiar form. A sculpture of Frederick Douglass planned for Central Park was supposed to include a representation of the quilt code, until New York City officials responded to protests from historians regarding its historical accuracy (Cohen 2007). Four months later, unaware of or unimpressed by the New York controversy, the *Fairview Enterprise* of Fairview, Kansas, reported:

Linda Duesing, [of the] Sunflower Quilt Shop, Hiawatha, [Kansas,] gave a very interesting presentation on the "Story of the Underground Railroad" Wednesday evening at the UCC Guild meeting. Linda showed the blocks as she told of the special meaning [that] they had to the slaves as [they] saw the quilts being laid and hung along the way, as they were being helped to escape from the South to Canada. . . . Visit Linda at the "Sunflower Quilt Shop" in Hiawatha and let her tell you a few more facts. (April 20, 2007)

In trying to account for why the problems of accuracy did not hamper the book's popularity, Brackman suggests, "The story of Black heroes risking their lives for freedom and White heroes risking their liberty to shelter them has resounding appeal" (2004:3). Although the book emphasizes black agency and honors "African American ancestors, not just as slaves but also as masters of their own destiny," Brackman is right that it also has white heroes (Tobin and Dobard 1999:67). For instance, Canadian abolitionist Alexander Ross is "credited with devising an elaborate mathematical code to assist slaves" in escaping (1999:67). In accounting for the book's appeal for black Americans in particular, Freeman also pinpoints the element of black agency in an interview with *Time* magazine: "*Hidden in Plain View* is how we got over those white folks. . . . African Americans are starved for those kind of stories in our culture" (Freeman quoted in Stukin 2007). In considering the book's popularity in school lesson plans, *New York Times* reporter Noam Cohen cites Doubleday executive Janet Hill in suggesting that teachers embraced "the quilting-codes theory because of its useful pedagogic elements: a secret code, artwork and a story of triumph" (Hill; quoted in Cohen 2007).

*Hidden in Plain View* offers a unifying vision of African American quiltmaking that crosses race and class lines, in that all slave-descended African Americans (working class and middle class) are allied with ethical whites (northerners, perhaps, more than southerners) on high moral ground against the forces of bigotry (slave owners and

slave catchers). This representation may well have been a relief to quiltmakers, both black and white, as it offered an alternative to the divisive Africanist interpretation.

### *High Art: Early 2000s*

The last representation of African American quiltmaking that I want to discuss was launched in 2002 with the *Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibit; extended in 2006 with a second exhibit, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, which traveled to art museums through 2008; and again in 2007 with a third exhibit, *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond*, scheduled through 2010 at art, folk art, and historical museums (*Quilts of Gee's Bend* 2004–5; see Figure 7). Attracting at least a million visitors (W. Arnett 2006:55), the first exhibit displayed seventy quilts, including many with traits that scholars had labeled as Africanisms, and framed them as masterpieces made by geniuses. The quilts were made by women from a low-income black community in Alabama that was active in the civil rights movement and that had spawned the Freedom Quilting Bee in 1966 (Callahan 1987:45, 159, 166, 231–8). The first exhibit was shown at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts (September to November 2002), then it toured to twelve art museums in cities around the United States, including New York; Washington, D.C.; Cleveland; Milwaukee; Memphis; Mobile; Boston; and Atlanta (W. Arnett 2006:55; *Quilts of Gee's Bend* 2004–5). The main force behind the exhibit was William Arnett, a white collector of southern black folk art whose Tinwood Alliance owns most of the quilts exhibited.

Interviews, articles, and generally glowing reviews appeared in the media, including television, popular magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals. "Stitches in Time," a three-page article in *House and Garden* magazine, stated that "A museum exhibition of quilts from tiny Gee's Bend, Alabama, demonstrates the astonishing, visionary potential of a humble craft" (Pollack 2002:98). While observing that the pieces "conform to the stereotypical African-American quilt aesthetic," *Textile* reviewer Christine Tate wrote, "The quilters of Gee's Bend have been succeeding—apparently without needless striving—at making art. There is no other word for the splendor, energy, and power of their creations" (2003:n.p.). *Journal of American Folklore* reviewer Karen M. Duffy noted "the absolute unity of spirit that these quilts possess[,] even in their dazzling diversity," and advised, "Go fully prepared to enjoy . . . an exciting, stunningly beautiful exhibit that breaks down doors" (2007:95). These responses were a far cry from the rejections that had met Scheper-Hughes's (2003) efforts to place Gee's Bend quilts in New England shops thirty years earlier.

The exhibit was accompanied by a \$75 book (*Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, 432 pages), a \$45 abridged version (*The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, 192 pages), and a \$30 videocassette (Beardsley et al. 2002a, 2002b; M. Arnett and Vadim 2002). Price tags on Gee's Bend quilts that I saw at the Kentucky Museum of Arts and Design in Louisville in fall 2004 ran from \$5,500 to \$14,000. The videocassette shows the quiltmakers in peaceful rural settings, singing hymns as they sew. Authors of the essays in the books tend to frame the Gee's Bend quilts as untutored expressions of a Western art-world aesthetic and place them outside of the quilt world. For instance, black curator Alvia Wardlaw notes the strong improvisational "here and now" aesthetic of



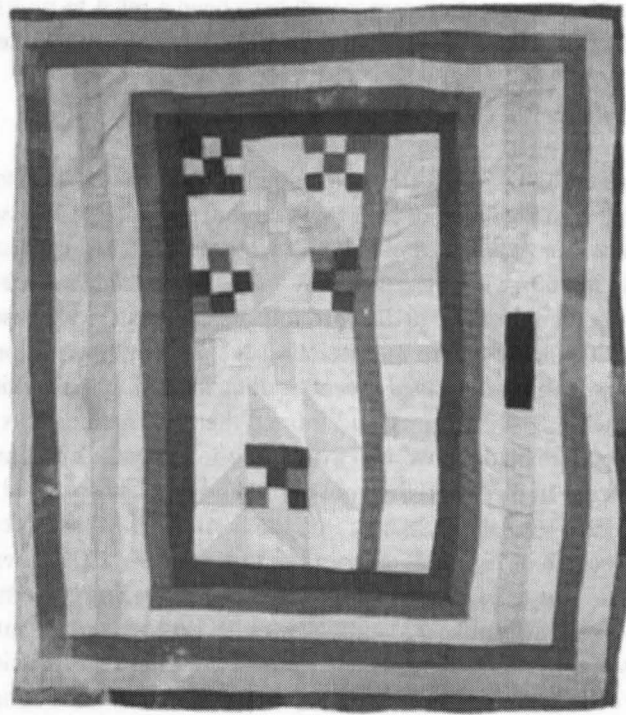


Figure 7. Sampler medallion, Nancy Pettway, southwestern Alabama, 1968. This quilt from the *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* exhibit and book (Arnett, Cubbs, and Metcalf 2006:121), is one of those that many African American women in Gee's Bend made for everyday use historically, and which some art critics now call artistic masterpieces. "That was one to keep warm by," says Nancy Pettway (personal communication, November 1, 2008). Owner: Tinwood Alliance. Photo credit: Pitkin Studio.

the quilts and the "offbeat, pulsating rhythm" of a "Star" quilt that is "totally different from a traditional star pattern." Echoing the Africanist quilt scholars, she represents the quilts as "quite unlike the norms of American quiltmakers" (2002:14). Her use of the words "traditional" and "norms" probably references quilt-world standards for fancy quilts.

In an essay in the catalogue for the 2006 exhibit, William Arnett also places Gee's Bend quilts in the art world rather than the quilt world. He states that quiltmaker Annie Mae Young "rejected as too dainty the dictates of normal quiltmaking and steered toward an almost primitivist technique," refers to a quilt of Mary Lee Bendolph's whose "stripped-down formalism (like so many Gee's Bend quilts) fits easily with the universalist aesthetic claims of high modernism," and suggests that America Irby's "elegant variation on the center-medallion form of 'Housetop' quilt . . . could almost be an architectural blueprint for a classical temple" (2006:25, 27, 37). Although Gee's Bend quiltmakers have used common quilt-world patterns such as Dresden Plate, Lone Star, Nine-Patch, Bow Tie, and Double Wedding Ring, Arnett foregrounds

quilts that seem to defy quilt-world standards for fancy quilts, such as coordinated color schemes, consistent block designs, and evenly sized pieces (Callahan 1987:38, 146, 161, 197, 200; Bendolph 2006:174; Bennett 2006:161; W. Arnett 2006:21). His use of art-world words such as "primitivist" to describe them emphasizes his application of a different set of standards.

By portraying Gee's Bend quiltmakers both as geographically and culturally isolated and as carriers of a unique local tradition, their promoters combine exoticism and stability in their representation of African American quilting. Their attempt to boost the Gee's Bend quilts from the level of outsider folk art, already achieved by quilts with Africanisms, into the high-art realm depends on the exclusion not only of white quiltmakers but also of Gee's Bend quilts in recognizable quilt-world patterns and of black quiltmakers who happen not to live in Gee's Bend or who are urban, middle class, northern, or mainstream. In constructing the Gee's Bend quiltmakers as an isolated group whose quilts are "quite unlike the norms," promoters play on the art-world stereotype of artists as eccentric outsiders. The Gee's Bend representation also associates quilting with the model homemaker, but in an updated fashion: here, the model homemaker retains the qualities of industry and taste, but her taste aligns with Western art-world standards rather than conventionally feminine and refined quilt-world standards, and the political component of patriotism is traded in for that of civil rights activism.

The high-art representation serves at least three goals: to give Gee's Bend quiltmakers pride in their distinctive heritage, to offer alternative aesthetic standards to those of the quilt world, and to challenge art-world distinctions between folk art and high art. Like the Africanist scholars, Gee's Bend promoters protect the otherness of the quilts in which they are interested by never placing them in an interracial, regional, quilt historical context, which might have revealed commonalities with other rural southern quilts that were made by white as well as black women for home use.

### *Interpreting the Interpreters*

All of the representations discussed above were constructed by downplaying some qualities of quilting and locating others in certain contexts. In the period of omission, quilt history authors adopted a conservative representation designed to affirm the existing social order while valorizing domesticity and winning acceptance of quilt history as an area worthy of serious study. Their interests were furthered by using quilts as emblems of national stability and continuity and by minimizing associations with stigmatized groups and contingency styles.

In contrast, the participation period of the 1960s and 1970s was a time when counterculture movements were challenging the social order. It tended to exclude elite representations of quilting, positing it as a folk art expression of "the people." As the image of the quiltmaker as the ideal homemaker lost potency, there was more interest in alternative quiltmaker roles, more potential for appreciation of differing styles, and more opportunities for cultural critics to see quilting as an arena in which to challenge conservative values. Of the rising interest in material culture in the 1970s, Bronner says that there was "a critical bent in many studies that confronted American

middle-class preconceptions of materialism and modernism by studying American subcultures in ethnic, racial, and regional communities" ([1985] 1992:10). The increased interest in nonelite quiltmakers followed that trend. Thompson, for instance, displayed a "critical bent" in characterizing the persistence of African influences in textiles and architecture as part of "a history of resistance to the closures of the Western technocratic way" (1983:222). It is not surprising that scholars interested in culture change would have seen an African American representation of a historically patriotic symbol as a way to criticize mainstream values; nor is it surprising that, in this period of gender role redefinition, the concept of an alternative aesthetic for a quintessentially female cultural practice would have become a lightning rod for clashes between quilt-world outsiders, who were often male, and insiders, who were almost all female.

Coming to public attention in the late 1970s, the Africanist view of quiltmaking was part of a broader trend in the humanities and social sciences to valorize marginalized groups. Ethnographers who criticized Western exhibits of "tribal" art in the 1980s for inadequately contextualizing the art objects were similarly concerned with challenging what they saw as an arrogant hegemonic mentality (Morphy 2006). In this milieu, historian of anthropology James Clifford developed a model of the art-culture system that recognizes the prominent role of Western taste arbiters in setting values of indigenous art and artifacts (Clifford 1988:223–6). This model posits that values are negotiated by a variety of Western experts, while indigenous object makers often become caught between them (see also Myers [1991] 1995:81). In the arena of African American quiltmaking, conflicts turned out to involve not only credentialed experts but also minority-group art makers who had the cultural capital to challenge scholarly authority and methodology. Diane Losche has observed that groups within ostensibly the same culture may have differing interpretations of the same objects: "In some ways apparently neighboring discourses within the same cultural context are as foreign and 'orientalized' to one another as foreign and not very friendly countries" (Losche 1993; quoted in Marcus and Myers 1995:5). The contesting of the African and *Hidden-in-Plain-View* interpretations illustrates just such differences.

In the interracial cross-fertilization period anchored by *Hidden in Plain View* (1999), African American quilts are represented as displaying a blend of European and African influences, the notion of quiltmaking as an arena of slave agency enters into popular culture, and the image of a black quiltmaker who makes quilts for her own purposes becomes familiar. The historical component helps to write African Americans into U.S. quiltmaking history generally, addressing lapses of the period of omission. However, differing possible interpretations of African American quiltmaking, as more or less different from European American quiltmaking, are still being negotiated. Tobin and Dobard do not so much contradict quilt-world values as enrich them, in part by capitalizing on the fascination of the U.S. population with secret codes. Part of their book's appeal lies in its revelation of an unsuspected dimension of meaning lurking in an old familiar form; further, they highlight the technological accessibility of quiltmaking—the way in which resourceful underdogs can appropriate the genre from the dominant culture, give it new meanings, and outwit the oppressors on their own turf. In framing quiltmaking as an equalizing

force, Tobin and Dobard link African Americans to the traditional patriotic associations of the form and update these with nods to the civil rights and women's liberation movements. This project harnesses the capacity of quilts (as material objects) to offer stability and continuity and puts it to a very different purpose than that of the early quilt historians.

Much of the power of Tobin and Dobard's book derives from their masterful use of what we might think of as material-culture props. The book contains photographs of quilts and quilt blocks dating from before the Civil War to the 1980s, maps, a wagon wheel, an "Iron Wheel motif" made by contemporary African American blacksmith Philip Simmons, undated samples of African Andinkra cloth, Bogolanfini cloth and raffia cloth, an undated memory board from the Luba people of "the Republic of the Kongo," an undated African head mask from the Punu people with a mark that resembles a Nine-Patch quilt block on its forehead, and Dobard's Log Cabin quilt, which is depicted as draped over the window sill of a "slave cabin" (1999:50-1, 146-7). The following excerpt from Tobin's epilogue illustrates her intensive reliance on material culture to construct her master context: "I sat for days amid pails of sweet grass and palmetto, rode a horse-drawn carriage past architectural remnants of King Cotton, rice, and indigo, and strode along rows of slave cabins hidden away from the Big House. . . . I sat in slave-crafted pews inscribed with tribal signatures and looked down on floorboards bored with holes for those hiding underneath" (1999:163-4). Tobin and Dobard demonstrate expertly how to construct worlds of meaning through the application of language to material items, plumbing every shred of their underdeterminedness and leaving nothing to chance.

The contradictions between the *Hidden in Plain View* and Africanist representations demonstrate how the underdeterminedness of physical objects functions to make them available to diverse ideological agendas. Joyce Joiner Newman picked up on this phenomenon in her recent review of an exhibit of African American quilts. In the exhibit, the quilts were used to illustrate how standard mainstream patterns were used in the presumed Underground Railroad quilt code. Newman writes, "In seeking to illustrate the existence of these patterns in African American quilts, the collectors have selected quilts that conform more to Anglo American than to African aesthetic traditions" (2003:107). Her insight points up the underdeterminedness of quilting generally and the diversity of African American quilting in particular, factors that make it easy for people from differing contexts and with differing interests to support differing interpretations.

The high-art trope of the Gee's Bend exhibit retains the Africanist component of otherness but attributes it to the distinctive New World historical experience of a narrowly bounded African American folk community. This construction serves its goal of achieving elite status for a material form, one that the Africanists had helped to raise from Clifford's category of lowly domestic craft to the respectable realm of folk art (Clifford 1988:223-6). Focusing on a minuscule community and presenting it as isolated and homogeneous helped the Gee's Bend exhibit promoters establish a strong foundation of expertise and authority on which to construct their representation of the tradition as unique. Although Gee's Bend quilting had long been a source of

continuity and stability locally, its national meaning was undetermined at the time the first exhibit opened, and it is still developing. It was more determined in the late 1960s, when New England shops declined to carry Gee's Bend quilts and Freedom Bee seamstresses standardized their needlework products in order to sell them in bulk to department stores (Scheper-Hughes 2003:19; Callahan 1987:115–9, 246). In the early twenty-first century, it was the quilts that *violated* quilt design conventions that won the praise of art critics; however, this was after the art-quilt movement had led to increased appreciation of a contingency-quilt aesthetic and before the concept of African American quiltmaking had been popularized by Africanist quilt interpreters and *Hidden in Plain View*. With the ground prepared by these intervening representations, and with a dedicated and savvy promotion team, Gee's Bend quilts have come knocking on the art-world door.

An expert who might be summoned to testify on their behalf is art historian Janet Catherine Berlo, who acknowledges that African American women make a variety of quilt styles but elevates the so-called African-influenced quilts. Describing these with terms such as "innovative," "playful," "syncopated," "bold, painterly," and possessing an "expressive genius," she writes that "[i]t is possible to celebrate the rural Southern black quilting tradition as one of the great American art forms" (2003:28). By assuming that slave seamstresses sewed only "in whatever style was demanded" (as did Vlach) and that only *blacks* in the rural South make the alternative, improvisational style of quilt, Berlo's context excludes the possibility that both fancy and so-called African quilt styles could be products of interracial interactions (2003:27–8; Vlach 1978:44). Unaccounted for is the fact that certain "African" characteristics have been associated with certain European American quiltmakers. For instance, bright, bold color schemes have been associated with Pennsylvania German quiltmakers, and an improvisational, process-oriented aesthetic with Scots-Irish quiltmakers (Finley [1929] 1970:37–9; Valentine 1995:35–7; see Figure 8).

The traditionalization of Gee's Bend quilts is still under way at the national level. Celebrated in 2006 by a series of postage stamps and a new traveling exhibition, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, the quilts have carved a deep niche in popular culture but a somewhat shallower one in the art world. Of the more than two hundred quilts shown in the 2006 exhibition catalogue, I found only twelve listed as belonging to high art institutions: Art Institute of Chicago (two quilts: P. Arnett, Cubbs, and Metcalf 2006:13, 34); Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (five quilts, all gifts from Arnett's Tinwood Alliance: 30, 37, 54, 74, 148); Milwaukee Art Museum (one quilt: 75); High Museum of Art, Atlanta (three quilts: 128, 195, 214); and Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia (one quilt: 208). The Gee's Bend promoters thus have made inroads into the art-world since opening the first exhibit in 2002. The appearance of the show in high-art venues, says art historian Sally Anne Duncan, can only be described as "a passing phenomenon" until museums begin adding the quilts to their permanent collections (2005:32). Otherwise, Duncan says, the quilts remain like other examples of self-taught art—outside of "the art historical canon" (2005:31). At present, their status might be described as liminal, teetering at the intersection of folk art, high art, and popular culture.



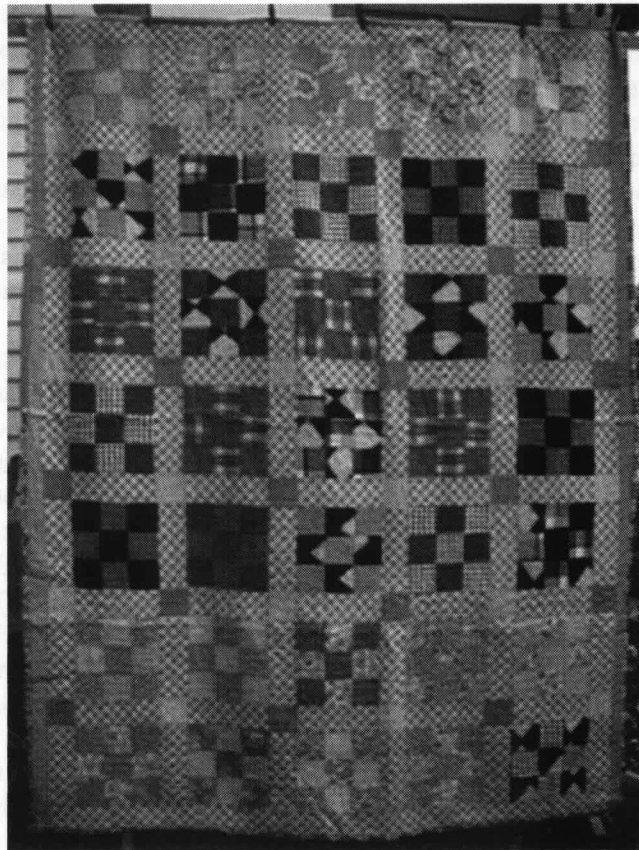


Figure 8. Nine-Patch, anon., 1940s. This quilt purchased at an antique mall in southeastern Kentucky has what quilt studies scholar Fawn Valentine (1995) calls "Scotch-Irish quiltmaking aesthetics." In her view, features of that aesthetic include fan quilting (sets of concentric semicircles) and a variable color scheme in the pattern blocks. This approach to color can be seen as a form of improvisation, although all the blocks in the quilt are pieced the same. Owner and photo credit: Teri Klassen.

### *Conclusion*

The idea of African American quiltmaking as a valuable form of expressive culture emerged in mainstream American discourses in the 1970s in response to changing representations of African Americans, quiltmaking, and women. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has said of the creation of "folk art" by modern art curators in the 1930s, its invention was a case in which "[n]ew categories create new subjects out of old materials" (1995:237). As the elevation of folk art challenged high-art sensibilities, so representations of African American quiltmaking challenged older visions of the quiltmaker as model homemaker and also threatened to exclude African American women from them. Working in tandem with the art-quilt move-

ment, African American quiltmaking has been used to update the concept of quiltmaking generally to fit contemporary needs and values. As changes in social conditions cause existing representations to become dysfunctional, astute observers can develop alternative perspectives by reframing familiar objects or importing exotic ones to fill current needs. Folklorists are well situated to perform this operation, although less-credentialed agents, such as the early quilt history authors, may also step in. "Serious study is a positive revolutionary force," says Glassie, and innovative folklorists cited here, such as Fry, Twining, Vlach, Freeman, Ferris, Roach, and MacDowell, did much to correct past errors, although their work sometimes had unforeseen repercussions (Glassie [1985] 1992:58).

As I have tried to show, those who wish to reaffirm existing social relations can use familiar forms of material culture to support established values. Alternatively, those who desire change may choose to study new genres or construct exotic representations of old ones because their greater undeterminedness facilitates interpretations that challenge the status quo. Whether familiar or exotic, *material* culture is an especially potent scholarly resource because it can be showcased in exhibits that attract public attention, and scholars can interpret the material (in catalogues, exhibit signage, or reviews) in ways that make their case, whether critical or laudatory. The launching of new representations may reflect a moral imperative—that is, the scholar's sense that prompt action is necessary to meet a pressing social need. For example, a feeling of urgency and confession is evident in Vlach's statement quoted above ("I overreached all over the place because someone had to light the fire") and in Thompson's prediction that "[t]he everyday assumptions, which elevate ignorance to definition, will disappear before the truth" ([1969] 1983:58). Over the long run, however, new representations can end up contributing to cultural continuity if they generate discourse that keeps old forms useful by updating outmoded meanings.

The interpretation of physical objects in language can be used to maintain the existing order or to introduce representations that challenge the familiar and test its current social value. "As concrete media, words and things are accessible to a public, bearing formal properties that are open to the evaluative gaze of others," says Keane (1997:231–2). A new representation is likely to gain power only if it meets needs unfilled by existing ones, though that need may be only the need for novelty. That the Africanists' interpretation endured even though it was felt to be essentializing and divisive in certain quarters is evidence that people saw the potential for newly relevant social meaning in its discovery of a preexisting but unexploited material resource. The idea of a jazzy, contingency-quilt aesthetic lay below the quilt-world radar, an untapped cultural reserve. There had long been local and specialist knowledge of improvisational quilt styles geared to everyday household use and of African American participation in quiltmaking, but the Africanists' interpretation blended the two into a new cultural product, setting the quilts in the context of an alternative value system and opening new opportunities for minority quiltmakers who used them.

It is likely that the genre of the museum exhibit and its accompanying catalogue contributed to the success of the Africanists' representation. Placing objects in a hallowed educational environment and framing them with authoritative, contextual-



izing prose, the exhibit-catalogue combination is a potent method of affirming old representations or launching new ones; it figures prominently in the dissemination of representations of African American quiltmaking (e.g., Vlach 1978; Freeman 1981; Wahlman 1983, 1993; Leon [1987] 1990; Fry 1990; Grudin 1990; Benberry 1992; Beardsley et al. 2002a, 2002b; P. Arnett, Cubbs, and Metcalf 2006).<sup>6</sup> Lacking any quilts known to have been used in Underground Railroad escapes, Tobin and Dobard (1999) compensated with many photographs of quilts that show the designated patterns. Testifying to the efficacy of their premise, exhibits of African American quilts that used those patterns were mounted later (e.g., James 2003). The power of combining objects and language is noted by Keane: "That neither words nor things are efficacious on their own demonstrates their practical complementarity: each makes up for a lack in the other" (1997:179). The success of *Hidden in Plain View* shows that, properly combined with words, even mere book illustrations (and probably on-line imagery as well) can be as or more powerful than a museum display and catalogue in winning over both elite and popular adherents.

Once in the public eye, a new representation of material objects is subject to discourse in language that shapes it until it is widely accepted, understood, and used. This process is particularly visible in *Hidden in Plain View*. Keane has noted the important role of language at this stage. Drawing on the work of Michael Silverstein, he says, "Whereas language should not be the privileged theoretical model for a semiotics of material things, discursive practices *do* play a crucial role in ideological consolidation or semiotic regimentation . . . in rendering objects legible, full of stabilized 'meaning'" (2005:199). The process is similar to the one described by Evermann and her colleagues, who, building on the ideas of Ricoeur, offer a model that describes how people reach a consensus when interpreting texts: "We can discuss, we can argue, and we can strive for agreement as long as our reasons are based on what is contained within the text or object itself" (1997:162). Given the greater underdeterminedness of nonverbal texts, those who negotiate the meaning of such texts are less constrained by the maker's parameters than are interpreters of verbal text. With objects, we are freer to construct representations that meet current social needs. The process of publicly negotiating meaning begins to traditionalize a new object representation, making it a familiar part of a commonly shared culture. The interactions that turn a material item into a cultural object, defined by Keane as "a repeatable, relatively stable, and intertextually rich representation," increase the visibility of the object and create a shared social context for the parties involved in the negotiations (Keane 2005:198). As we have seen, certain scholars, collectors, quiltmakers, and quilt historians surely became more aware of each other's presence and concerns through negotiating the meaning of African American quiltmaking.

The increasingly visible discourses about the meaning of African American quiltmaking have paved the way for its acceptance into the larger U.S. quiltmaking tradition. A possible next step for scholars in this field is to develop a comprehensive scheme that relates the development of quiltmaking styles in the United States to interactions between ethnic groups, including those of English, Irish, Scots-Irish, German, Dutch, and diverse American Indian and African heritages. African American quiltmakers surely contributed to, as well as were shaped by, the varied ways that

European Americans practice quiltmaking (Benberry 1992:28–9; Cubbs 2006:78 n. 22). On the other hand, scholars must not neglect the role of nonethnic influences. “Time and region were more important to quilt design than race or condition of servitude,” says Brackman in her book on slave quiltmaking (2006:15). Other factors that should be considered are the age of the quiltmaker, rural or urban experiences, media taste arbiters, and class.

This examination of evolving ideas about African American quiltmaking demonstrates how representations of material forms result from the interaction of the interpreter’s context (social values, disciplinary paradigms, personal experiences) with qualities of the objects and aspects of the maker’s context. Interpretation is a creative process in which the weight given to the maker’s meaning depends on the ability and desire of the interpreter to comprehend it. The interests of social change are sometimes served by disregarding the maker’s meaning. As a folklorist attracted to improvisational contingency quilts, no matter who made them, I see a perhaps unintended benefit from the work on African American quilts discussed here—increased quilt-world recognition of this style as a legitimate aesthetic approach. I hope that this study encourages future work on the meaning of quiltmaking to African Americans, on the role of African Americans in U.S. quilt history, and on complementary uses of words and things. As the discourse on African American quiltmaking develops, it is clear that quilt history studies will continue to offer fertile ground for research.

### Notes

I am grateful to Jason Baird Jackson for comments on several versions of this work and for teaching the class on cultural property that spawned it. I also thank Susan Roach, Katherine R. Roberts, and John Michael Vlach for reading earlier versions. I am indebted to Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro for their careful editing and to three anonymous readers for constructive feedback.

1. In this article, I intend the term “mainstream quiltmaking” to refer to a creolized rather than purely European American tradition. This expresses my view that quiltmaking in the United States has been shaped not only by English, Dutch, French, Irish, Scots-Irish, and Scandinavian Americans, whose Old World roots included a folk quiltmaking tradition, but also by African, German, and Native Americans who were participating in quiltmaking in America by the nineteenth century, although their native cultures did not have folk quiltmaking traditions.

2. Examples of fancy quilts attributed to slaves by later quilt history books are an early 1800s chintz appliqué made by “Kadella” in North Carolina (Roberson 1988:59, 61; Fry 1990:20–1), an 1850 Princess Feather made by Mahulda Mize in Kentucky (Kentucky Quilt Project [1982] 1992:25), and an 1840s Field of Diamonds made by Millies Lake of Mississippi (Johnson 2001:21–2).

3. For images of model homemakers, see vintage *Sears* catalogues, newspapers, and women’s magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* from the period.

4. I am not questioning here the continuity of certain aspects of particular African cultures in the New World, as documented by scholars such as Melville J. Herskovits, William Bascom, Robert Farris Thompson, John F. Szwed, Roger D. Abrahams, John Michael Vlach, and others. In the case of U.S. quiltmaking, however, I argue that there has not been enough research on contingency-quilt styles and techniques to sort out their cultural influences.

5. The Cargo quilts can be seen by searching for the word “Cargo” in the International Quilt Study Center’s Web site “Search the Collections: Quilts To Share With The World” (2007).

Hicks lists ninety-eight institutions with African American quilts in their collections (2003:145–60). At that time, the largest numbers were at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Nebraska (156

quilts); the Old State House Museum in Little Rock, Arkansas (85); the Smith Robertson Museum in Jackson, Mississippi (41); the Old Capital Museum of Mississippi in Jackson (39); the Michigan State University Museum in East Lansing (27); the American Folk Art Museum in New York City (20); and the Kansas African American Museum in Wichita (10) (Hicks 2003:144). According to information gleaned from Hicks (2003:156–7) and also a January 8, 2008, e-mail message from Alana Staiti, administrative assistant in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's costume and textiles department, that museum now has about fifteen.

6. Listings of catalogues for African American quilt exhibitions fill nine pages in Hicks's bibliography (2003:38–46).

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